

**A Report to the Montana Department of Corrections on Community
Corrections Professionals' Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders**



Kirstin Balow, BSW candidate

Timothy B. Conley, Ph.D.

University of Montana School of Social Work

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Introduction

In March 2008, the School of Social Work at the University of Montana (UM) became aware that the Montana Department of Corrections (DOC) was planning to release a request for proposals to operate a residential sex offender treatment facility. At the same time, social work researchers from Texas were publishing an article in a leading journal concerning a survey instrument called "Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders" (CATSO). Eager to utilize a standardized survey instrument addressing attitudes towards sex offenders, UM undergraduate social work student Kirstin Balow, and Associate Professor Tim Conley offered to survey DOC corrections professionals' attitudes towards sex offenders using this instrument through an online survey method. The proposed survey study idea was well received by DOC management, and the study took place over the course of four weeks (March 17- April 14, 2008.)

Rational for study

At some point in their lives, nearly all sex offenders will return to living in the community, most remaining under the supervision of DOC. As of June 2008, there were approximately 12,862 offenders within the Montana correctional system with 1,191 (10.8%), being sex offenders (Deady, 2008; Anez, 2008). As DOC makes plans to establish a 116 bed residential sex offender treatment facility, it is prudent to assess various aspects of workforce knowledge, attitudes and beliefs relative to this population. Such an assessment may serve as a baseline for developing professional education and training programs. Moreover, exhibiting a willingness to look inwards at its own attitudes toward this controversial population may model an introspective process that would benefit the residents of any community that could potentially become the site of the facility.

An established UM/DOC partnership exists through previously conducted research and training services (Conley and Schantz, 2006). Through participation in trainings, much of MT DOC's community corrections workforce has already become familiar with the online process used for the CATSO survey study. This methodology proved to be an effective and efficient means of assessing workforce knowledge, attitudes and beliefs in the recent past.

Finally, the study provided a progressive opportunity to examine the performance of the survey instrument itself in the real world with a working population of corrections professionals. In this way, Montana contributes to the national professional body of knowledge concerning community corrections with this challenging group of offenders.

Methodology

Survey instrument

The CATSO survey instrument was designed to examine attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes concerning sex offenders (Church, et al. 2007). The authors reviewed the existing literature in this topic area and found a shortage of reliable and valid instruments. The CATSO questions were developed and validated with a population of 347 undergraduate students enrolled in several Introduction to Psychology classes at a major southern university; this is a common population to work with for instrument development. However, the intention was to develop an instrument that could be used with a wide variety of both public and professional

populations in diverse communities. This study is the first deployment of the instrument with a population of professional corrections workers.

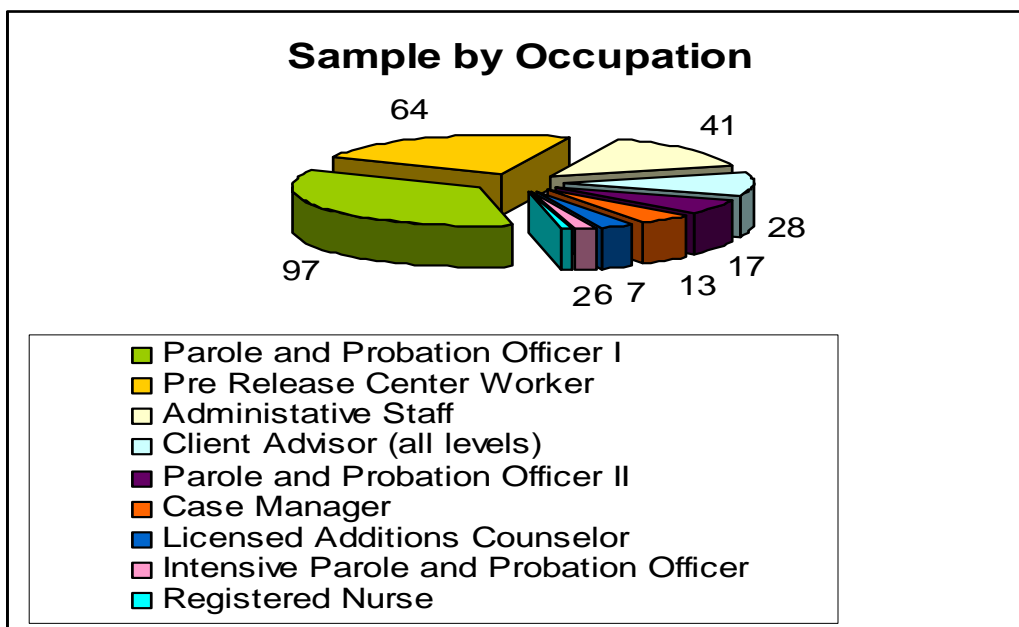
The new survey's questions ask participants to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with 18 statements concerning sex offenders. There are four main topic areas addressed: capacity to change, level of social isolation/ inclusion in a community, blame attributions, and sexual deviance (See Appendix 1 for a complete list of all survey questions).

Sample

The primary target group for this survey was probation/parole officers and community corrections workers in the state of Montana. The University's Institutional Review Board approved the proposed study's confidentiality plan. E-mail addresses for all Montana parole and probation officers and personnel at prerelease centers were provided to UM. An unintended but welcome "snowball" sampling effect was created when officers and personnel alike forwarded the survey e-mail to other workers in their organizations, thus increasing the survey study's sample size.

All officers in the state were invited to participate and, together with prerelease center workers, 505 persons were contacted, although with snowballing the survey may have reached more. The overall response rate was 60%, with 307 surveys completed. At the time of the survey there were 174 probation and parole officers; 120 of these responded to the survey for a probation officer response rate of 69%. For all survey participants the average time worked in corrections was 9.62 years (SD 8.57) with a median of 8. When probation/parole officers are looked at separately, (N=119 valid responses) the mean is 12.44 years (SD 8.99), the median 9.50. (See figure 1 below for a breakdown of the sample by occupation.)

Figure 1:



Procedure

The survey methodology was informed by Dillman (2006) with particular attention paid to chapter 11 which concerns internet surveys. The CATSO questions were posted on SelectSurvey®, an on-line survey software licensed by UM.

Each potential participant received a notification e-mail from their organization's management/administrative staff, telling of a future survey study to determine prevailing attitudes towards sex offenders. This initial communication indicated that the potential participants would soon receive an e-mail from UM that would include more information about the purpose and method of the survey study and a direct link to the actual survey.

The initial e-mail from the researchers provided a link to the survey where they would be asked to enter their e-mail addresses for tracking purposes, in order to avoid sending reminder e-mails to those who had already completed the survey. Minimal demographic information was collected in an effort to bolster confidence in the confidentiality of responses and thus to keep response rate higher; this was particularly important given the politically and emotionally charged nature of the survey content. No individual's identity was ever correlated with survey responses, as given e-mail addresses were deleted from the data upon receiving a completed survey.

Upon accessing the survey web-site, participants were thanked "for considering participation in this important survey" and presented the following instruction:

"Below are 18 statements about sex offenders and sex offenses. Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you may have heard, read, or learned; thus, we are less interested in the "right" or "wrong" answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding sex offenders. Even if you have no general knowledge about the issue, please provide an answer to each question."

Two follow up reminders were sent to non-responder's e-mails over the course of the next four weeks. At this point, the survey was closed and the data exported to a statistics program for analysis.

Outcomes

Frequency distribution bar graphs for all individual survey items are included as an appendix to this report for easy referral. These reflect the percentage of respondents who endorsed each response category, rating their level of agreement with each statement on a scale of 1 – 6 as follows: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Probably Disagree, 4=Probably Agree, 5=Agree and 6= Strongly Agree). For reporting purposes in this section, responses 1-3 are often collapsed to indicate "agreement" with the item and responses 4-6 collapsed to indicate "disagreement," though for some dialogue, specific response categories are teased out for further reporting and discussion.

Prior to frequency analysis, a t-test of difference for all items was run to determine if probation officers attitudes differed significantly from those of non-probation officers. They don't – all workers attitudes and ratings on all items were, on average, the same. Score on the CATSO is not correlated with number of years of employment with DOC and/or prerelease centers.

The analysis of outcomes that follows is not presented in the order that items appear in the survey, because items responses are best discussed as part of related conceptual groups. Therefore, when discussing individual item response distributions below, the item under discussion is identified in **[bold]** text by its number on the survey, after the item has been discussed. Coincidentally, the frequency distribution charts are also numbered the same.

Item analysis

In terms of managing sex offenders, 82% of respondents agree that rehabilitation is valuable for sex offenders **[11]**; on a related item, a little over half (55.4%) also agree that sex offenders can learn to change their behavior with “support and therapy” **[1]**. Thus, corrections workers endorse rehabilitation, as well as supportive therapy as being effective. The survey asked if sex offenders should “never be released from prison” and 82% of corrections professionals did not agree with that; while some 18% did agree, only 4.8% did so “strongly” **[18]**. Similarly, 60% of those surveyed don’t think sex offenders should lose their civil rights and of those who think they should lose them, only 7.4% felt “strongly” that they should **[2]**.

Several survey items addressed workers perceptions of offender’s social adequacy and isolation. Responses largely indicate that corrections workers do not perceive sex offenders as socially inadequate or isolated. For example, 83% disagree with the statement: “Sex offenders prefer to stay at home rather than be around lots of people” **[6]**, and only 14% agree with the statement that “most sex offenders do not have close friends” **[7]**. Finally, only 13% agree that “sex offenders have a difficult time making friends...” **[8]**. Respondents overwhelmingly rejected the idea that most sex offenders are unmarried men (94%) **[14]**. They were asked how much they agreed that “Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.” Overall, 65% agreed that these offenders *should* wear tracking devices, though opinions did not tend to the “strongly agree” response category **[12]**. A statistical t-test was run to see if the average response for this item differed between probation officers and non-probations officers, and no significant difference was identified.

Through examination of perceptions held towards sex *offenses* and sex *offenders*, respondents expressed attitudes about sentence length, severity of sex offense types, and the dangerousness of sex offenders as a whole. 93.4% of respondents disagreed with the statement: “The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.” Only 6.5% agreed with this statement **[9]**. 82.4% disagree with the statement: “Only a few sex offenders are dangerous” **[13]**. Respondents believe that most offenders are dangerous. 98% of survey respondents agree that emotional control is as bad as physical control in the context of a sex crime **[15]**. Correspondingly, 98% also agree that an acquaintance sex crime is as bad as a stranger sex crime **[17]**. One conclusion is that corrections workers do not differentiate dangerousness or severity based on whether the crime involves emotional coercion or familiarity with the victim. Similarly, survey respondent’s attitude towards ‘fondling’ and ‘rape’ indicate that they see one act as bad as the other **[5]**.

Finally, the survey addressed opinions about a sex offenders’ level of sexual deviancy. 82.1% of respondents disagreed (most of them “strongly disagree”) with the statement that “People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person” **[3]**. A related statement: “Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity” also evoked a majority (78%) of disagreement ratings from respondents. **[10]**. Survey respondents clearly do not see sex offenders as overly sexually active.

Conclusions and Discussion

This survey of corrections workers attitudes towards sex offenders was conducted collaboratively by DOC and UM and has yielded a representative portrayal of perceptions across diverse concepts relative to sex offenders. It is the first of it's kind in the nation using this particular set of questions, and the willingness of the DOC to assess its own workforce' attitudes evidences a progressive approach to the management of this controversial population.

While respondents perceive that the sex offender population is dangerous, they clearly agree that offenders are amenable to rehabilitation. They do not differentiate between the severities of a sex crime based on whether the perpetrator knew the victim or not and also perceive that emotional control is not substantially different than physical control. With regards to offenders wearing tracking devices, most agreed that they should, but opinions on this item were not particularly strong. It is likely that the real world logistics of this affected opinions. They disagree with the idea that offenders should never get out of prison indicating a mature acceptance of the fact that most sex offenders *will* be released at some point and will fall under their community -level supervision.

One limitation to this study is the lack demographic information of participants. For example, we can not determine if male and female worker's attitudes differ, or if attitudes in eastern and western Montana differ. Moreover, informal discussions with officers after the survey was completed indicate they left some questions blank because their response would depend on the 'level of sex offender.' Unlike many in the general population, these corrections workers have a more sophisticated perception of what the term "sex offender" means and that perception changes based on classification level.

This study is currently being prepared as a manuscript for publication in a peer-reviewed social work research journal where it is hoped it will contribute to the knowledge base concerning those who work with this challenging offender population.

Appendix 1 (The actual survey instrument.)

Community Attitudes Towards Sex Offenders Scale (CATSO)

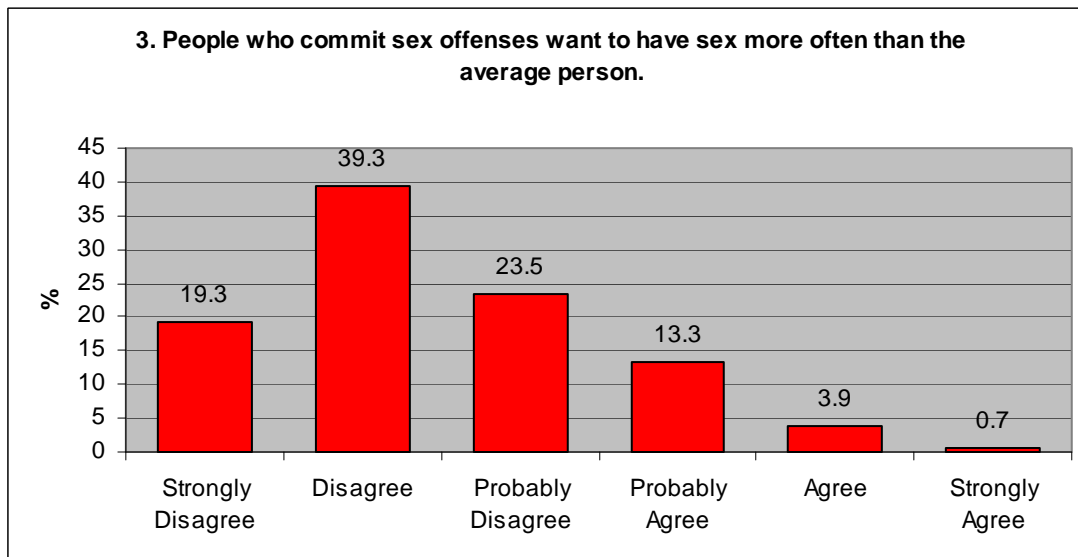
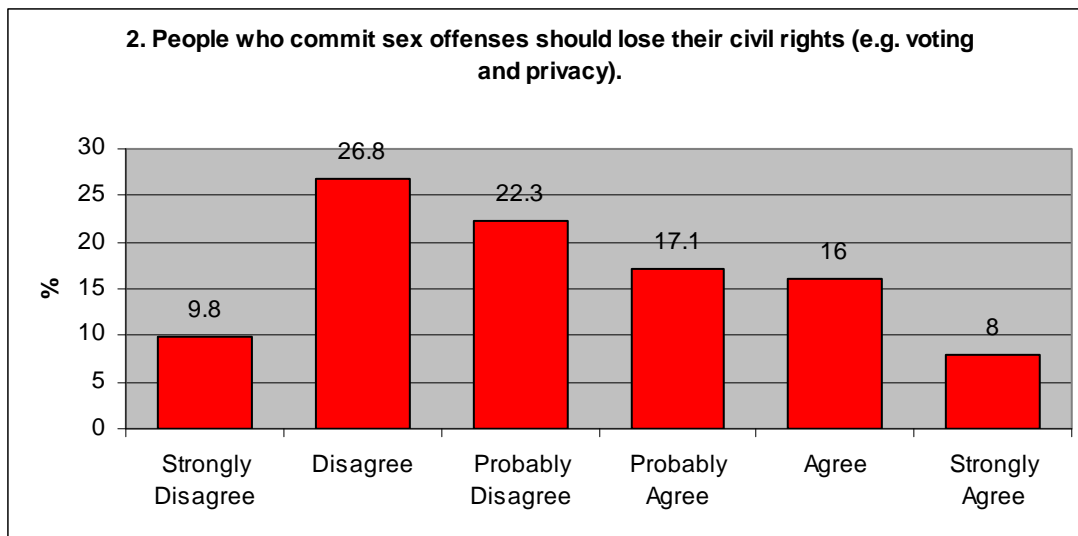
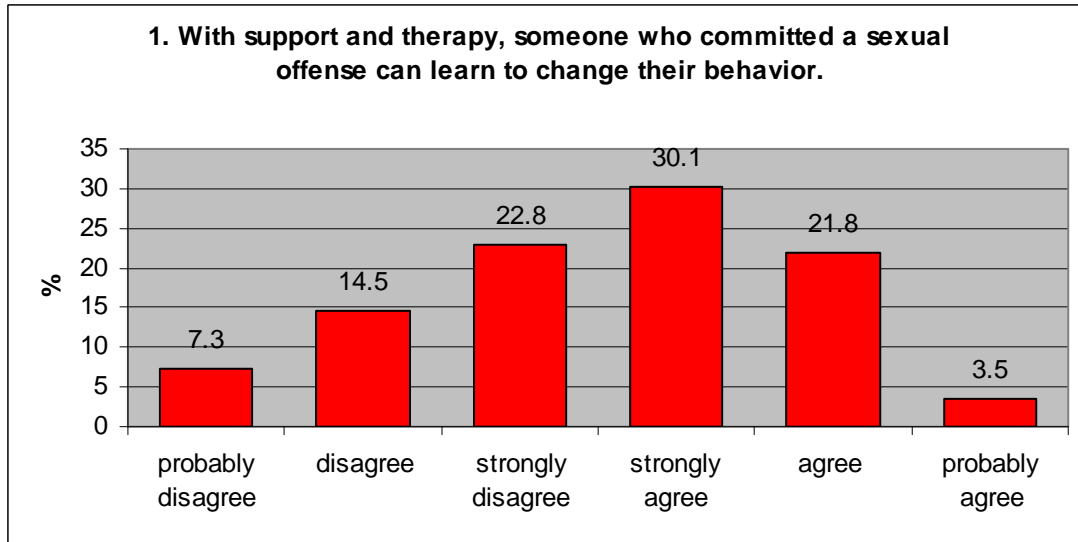
Items and Scoring

Below are 18 statements about sex offenders and sex offenses. Please select the corresponding number from the rating scale given below for the answer that best describes the way you feel or what you believe. Most of the statements below are difficult to prove or verify in an absolute sense, and many are specifically about your opinion based on what you may have heard, read, or learned; thus, we are less interested in the “right” or “wrong” answers, and more interested in your beliefs and opinions regarding sex offenders. Even if you have no general knowledge about the issue, please provide an answer to each question.

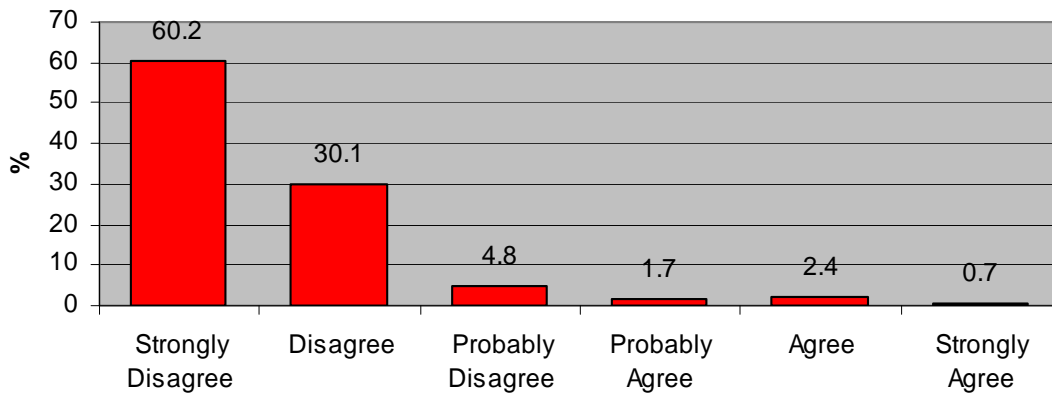
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Probably Disagree	Probably Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

1. With support and therapy, someone who committed a sexual offense can learn to change their behavior.
2. People who commit sex offenses should lose their civil rights (e.g. voting and privacy).
3. People who commit sex offenses want to have sex more often than the average person.
4. Male sex offenders should be punished more severely than female sex offenders.
5. Sexual fondling (inappropriate unwarranted touch) is not as bad as rape.
6. Sex offenders prefer to stay home alone rather than be around lots of people.
7. Most sex offenders do not have close friends.
8. Sex offenders have difficulty making friends even if they try real hard.
9. The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.
10. Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.
11. Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.
12. Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.
13. Only a few sex offenders are dangerous.
14. Most sex offenders are unmarried men.
15. Someone who uses emotional control when committing a sex offense is not as bad as someone who uses physical control when committing a sex offense.
16. Most sex offenders keep to themselves.
17. A sex offense committed against someone the perpetrator knows is less serious than a sex offense committed against a stranger.
18. Convicted sex offenders should never be released from prison.

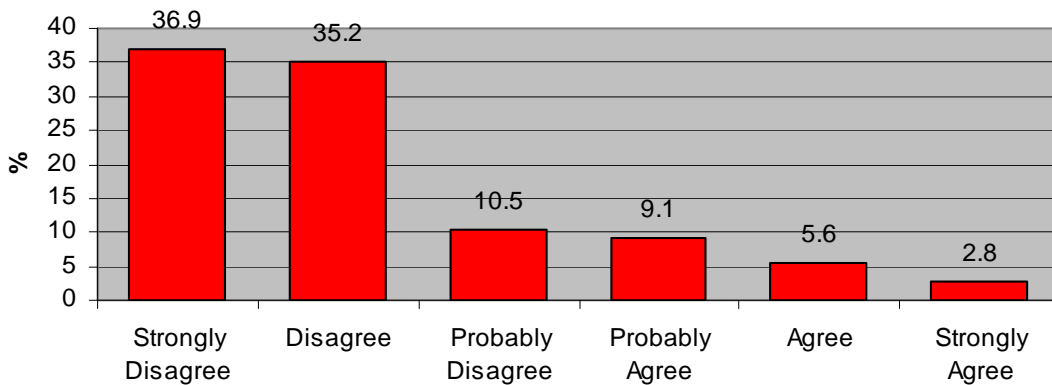
Appendix 2: (Single item frequency percents, in order presented on survey.)



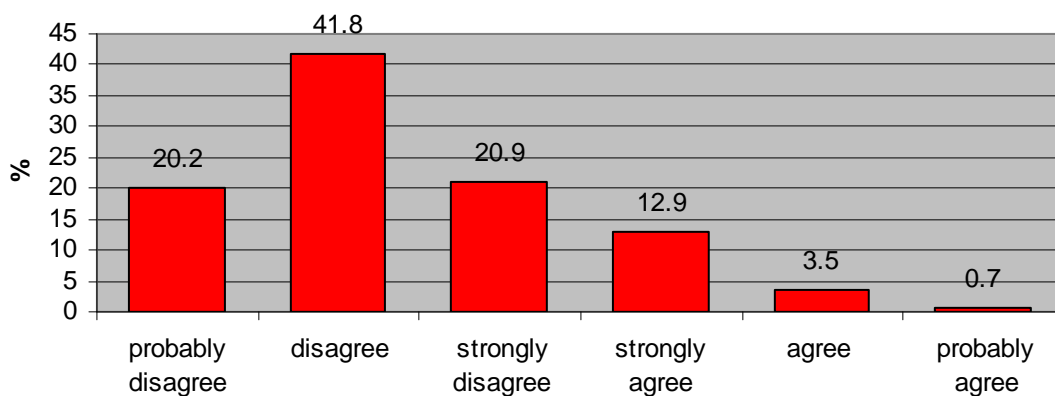
4. Male sex offenders should be punished more severely than female sex offenders.



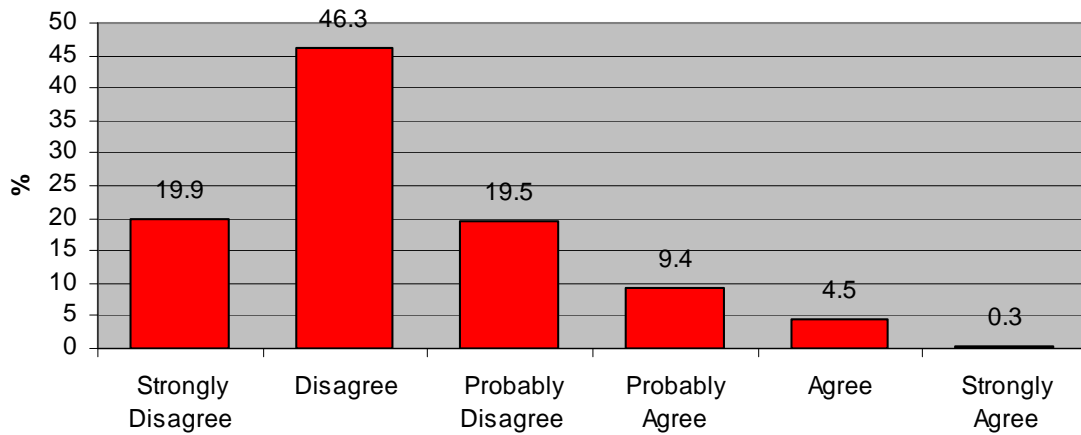
5. Sexual fondling (inappropriate unwarranted touch) is not as bad as rape.



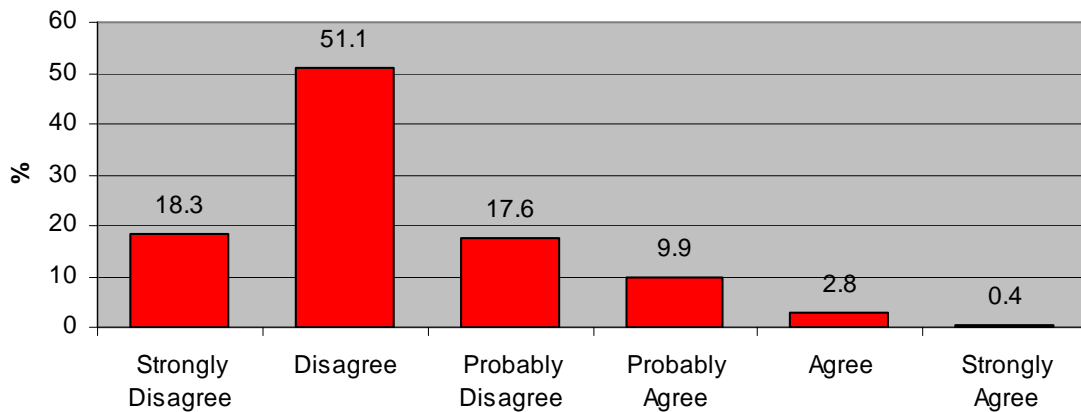
6. Sex offenders prefer to stay home alone rather than be around lots of people.



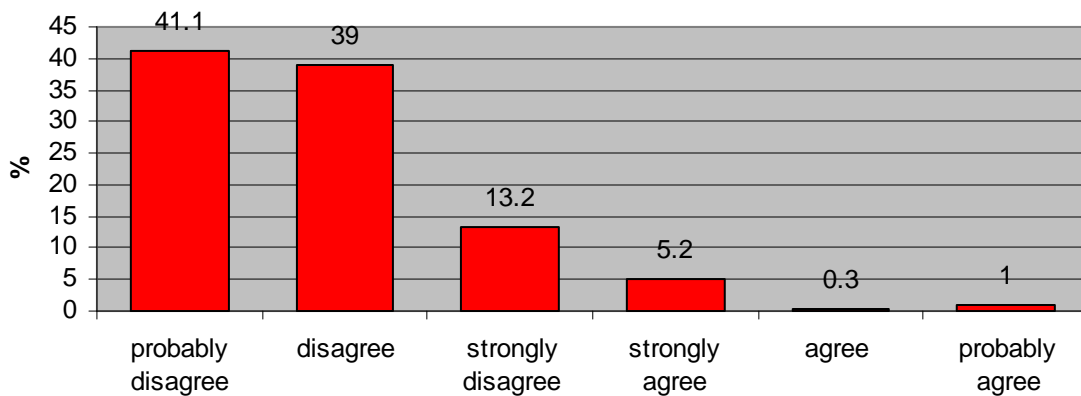
7. Most sex offenders do not have close friends.



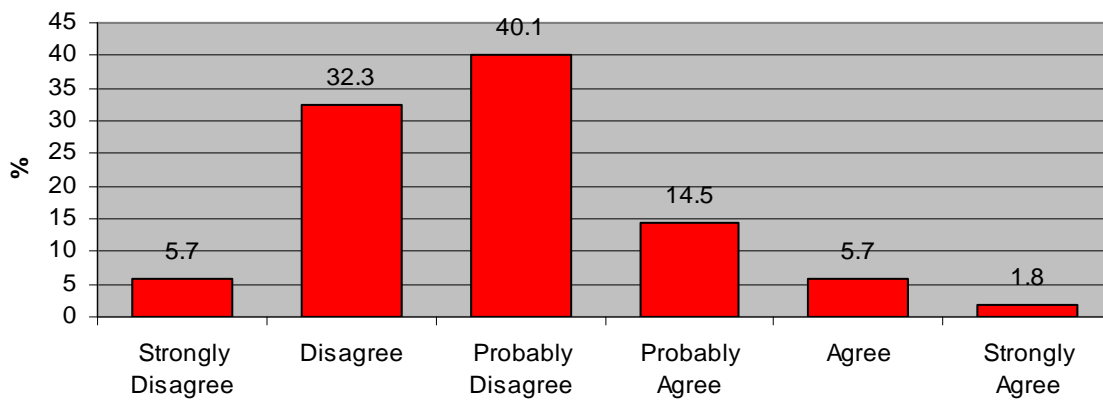
8. Sex offenders have difficulty making friends even if they try real hard.



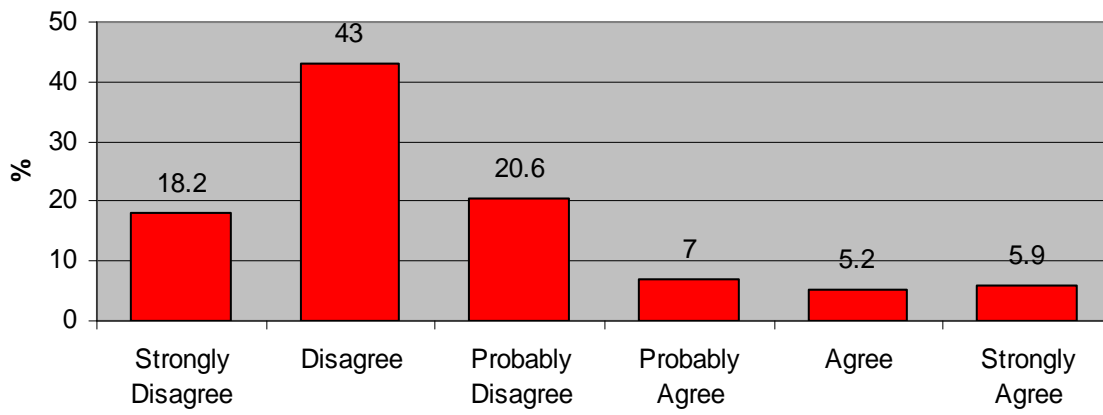
9. The prison sentences sex offenders receive are much too long when compared to the sentence lengths for other crimes.



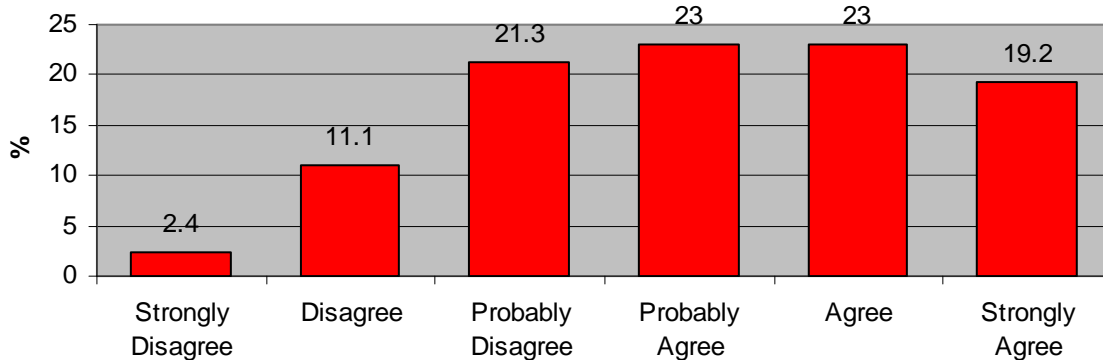
10. Sex offenders have high rates of sexual activity.



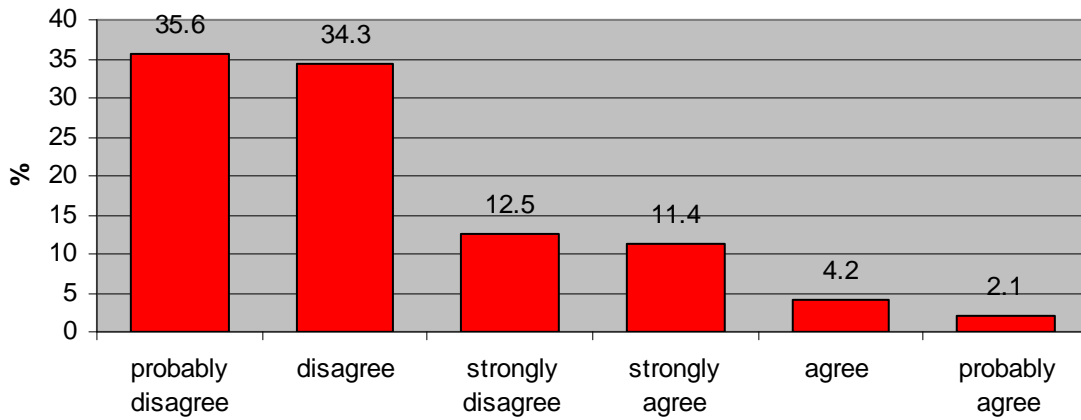
11. Trying to rehabilitate a sex offender is a waste of time.



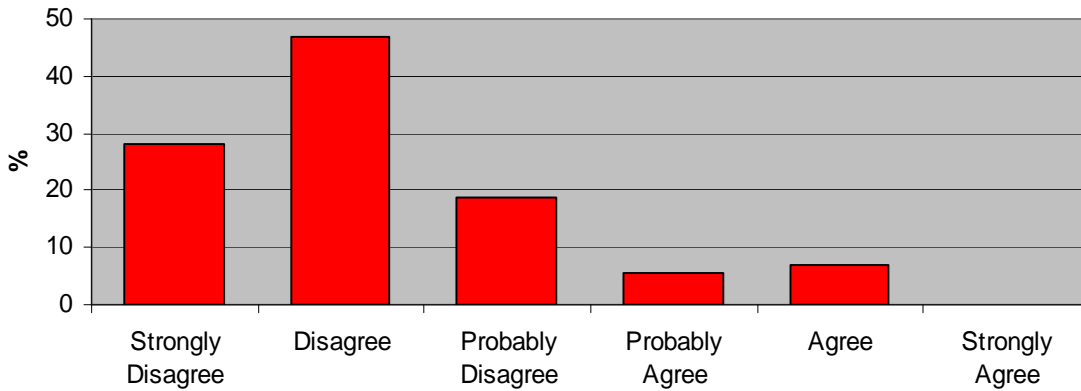
12. Sex offenders should wear tracking devices so their location can be pinpointed at any time.



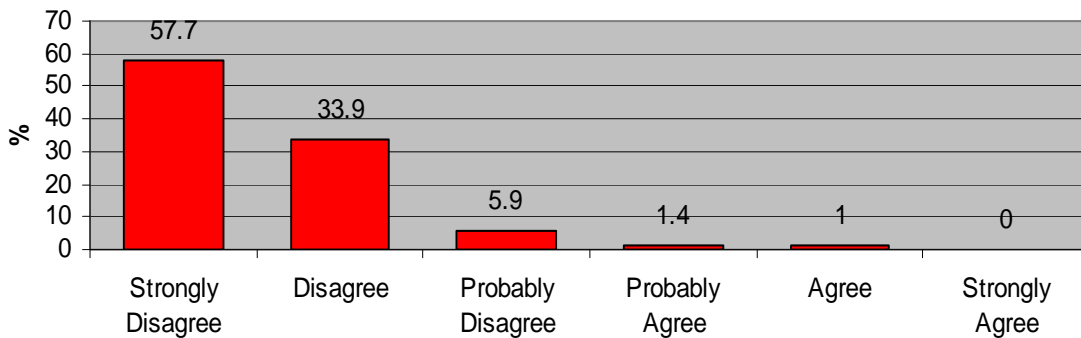
13. Only a few sex offenders are dangerous.

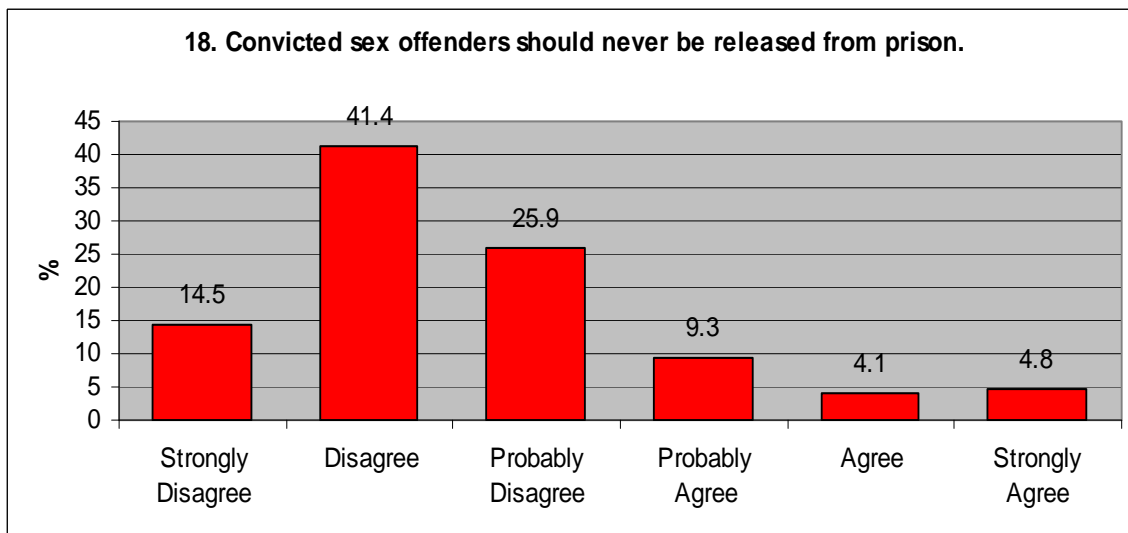
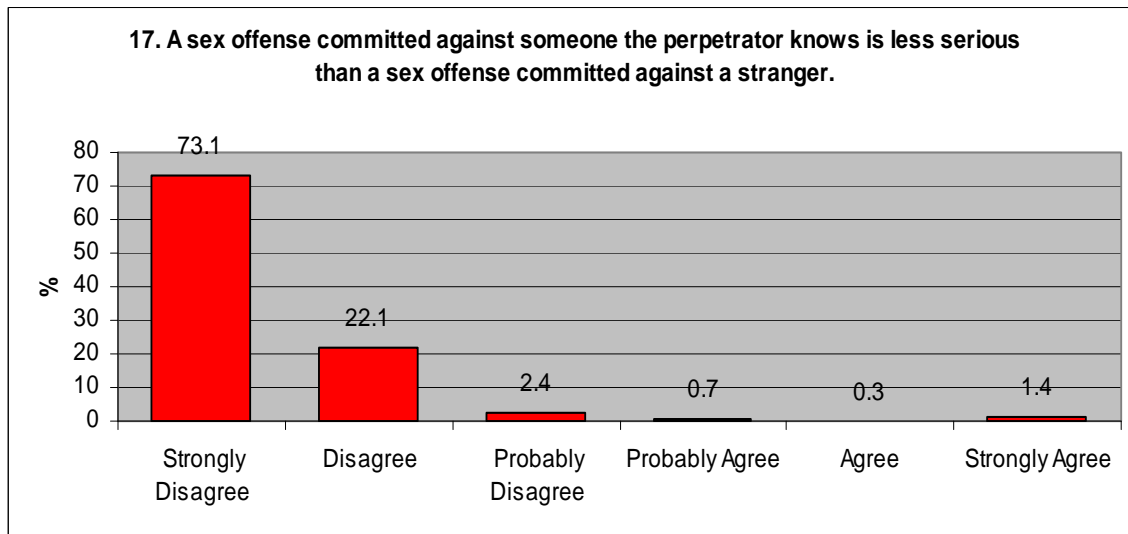
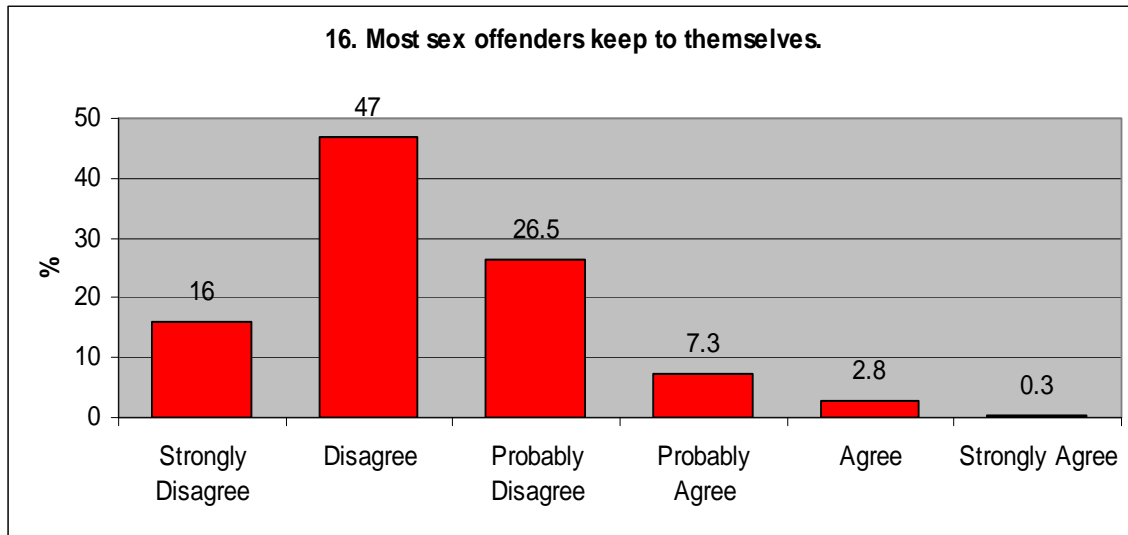


14. Most sex offenders are unmarried men.



15. Someone who uses emotional control when committing a sex crime is not as bad as someone who uses physical control when committing a sex offense.





References

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